DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 121 919 UD 015 976

TITLE	Backgrounder: Treatment of Asia Deficient in U.S. School Books, Survey Shows.
INSTITUTION	ASIA Society, New York, N.Y.
SPONS AGENCY	Ford Foundation, New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE	19 Mar 76
NOTE	18p.
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS	*Asian Americans; Asian History; Chinese Culture; Content Analysis; Cultural Differences; Cultural Factors; Cultural Images; *Ethnic Groups; *Ethnic Stereotypes; Group Norms; Minority Groups; Social Values; Surveys; *Textbook Bias; *Textbook Content; Textbook Evaluation; Textbook Selection; Textbook Standards

ABSTRACT

This study draws upon evaluations of 306 texts in common use in the 50 states. The books were read by over 100 experts who responded to a detailed questionnaire designed to assess the texts' amount of Asian content; accuracy, underlying assumptions and approach; inclusion of literature, the fine arts, and other primary expressions of the Asian experience; style and tone; and such supplementary aspects as illustration, teachers' guides, and bibliographies. Deficiencies are found in all these areas, but those regarded as most serious are the underlying Western yardsticks with which the vast majority of the texts approach Asia, their failure to present Asian life authentically, and the absence of any significant amount of Asian source materials. The net result of measuring Asian nations by Western standards is that they are described negatively in terms of what they do not have. In addition to describing Asia from a Western point of view, many texts talk about it to the extent that it serves American interests, discussing Asian countries primarily in terms of their strategic importance to the U.S. Literature, music, dance, and other aspects of Asian culture -- if included at all -- are presented negatively as hindrances to progress. In addition to the texts' general failure to include genuine representations of Asian experiences, their style and tone also reinforce their Western-centered approach. (Author/AM)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED121919

THE ASIA SOCIETY, INC.
For further information, contact
Bonnie R. Crown or Loretta Ryan:
(212) PL1-4210

976

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

BACKGROUNDER

Treatment of Asia Deficient in U.S. School Books, Survey Shows

The majority of American textbooks which discuss Asia are one-sided, disparaging, or condescending toward its peoples concludes a report published today by The Asia Society, a not-for-profit educational organization dedicated to deepening American understanding of that part of the world.

The study was undertaken in part because school texts reflect widely held public attitudes and assumptions, according to its director, Bonnie R. Crown, who initiated and directed the study for the Society.

UD 015 976

112 East 64th Street/New York, N.Y. 10021/212 Plaza 1-4210
Cable Address: ASIAHOUSE, NEWYORK

Conducted with support from The Ford Foundation, the study draws upon evaluations of 306 texts in common use in the 50 states. The books were read by over one hundred experts--most of them scholars and elementary and secondary teachers with Asian specialization--who responded to a detailed questionnaire designed to assess the texts' amount of Asian content; accuracy; underlying assumptions and approach; inclusion of literature, the fine arts, and other primary expressions of the Asian experience; style and tone; and such supplementary aspects as illustrations, teacher's guides, and bibliographies.

Deficiencies were found in all these areas, but those which The Asia Society regards as most serious were the underlying purely Western yardsticks with which the vast majority of the texts approach Asia, their failure to present Asian life authentically, and the absence of any significant amount of Asian source materials.

Since some of the 306 books in the sample turned out to be paperback versions of hardcover texts, the total number of titles evaluated was 272. The evaluators found that 71 per cent of them were to some extent progress-oriented, exalting the importance of Western-style change and "up-to-dateness" and representing Asian tradition as an impediment to change.

Although many Asians stress the importance of progress in their own societies, the report suggests that this criterion

as applied by Western writers may be inadequate to measure the total human assets of a society--any society--if it neglects or distorts cultural values and continuities.

The most frequently appearing aspect of judgment by a purely "progress" criterion is a belief in change as something necessary and valuable in and of itself. It pervades discussions of America appearing in world history books, as well as those of Asia, and is basic to their approach to history. "The story of man is one of progress" is the way one text puts it.

A reader found eight examples from one elementary book on India alone. Among them were the following: "Its people are changing from old ways to new modern ways." "Rural India is changing, though slowly." "Some villagers are learning how to run dairies. They learn how to make the milk safe to drink. Many other villagers go to industrial training schools. They learn to use the machines in India's new factories. They stop being farmers. They begin to lead a new life." "All these things mean that the people of India have a good chance of keeping their freedom during the transition to an up-to-date way of life."

In discussing tradition, on the other hand, texts may either ignore it or juxtapose it with modernity as if the two were in basic opposition to each other: "'Rocket experts ride buses alongside Indian mystics. Sacred cows

share the streets with automobiles...' The whole tone of this first page is dichotomous--tradition is set against modern technology," reports the evaluator of one text. Many see tradition and modernity in actual conflict, as in this example from another book on India: "Thus the joint family system is often found in traditional agricultural societies. It does not seem to work very well in an industrial society."

One result of seeing tradition and modernity in opposition to each other is that long-standing social institutions are regarded as obstacles to economic, social, or political modernization. References to the Indian caste system and to the refusal of many Indians to kill animals, especially the cow, formed the majority of examples of this viewpoint. The texts speak of caste as a hindrance to true democracy and national solidarity and often compare it with racial discrimination in the United States.

Some 76 per cent of the texts are basically Western-centered in their approach to Asia, using Western standards to measure Asia or emphasizing the role of Europeans and Americans in Asian development.

One of the forms the ethnocentric approach most frequently assumes is the belief that modernization will follow the same pattern in Asia as it has in the West and

that Asian accomplishments and shortcomings can therefore be measured against Western standards. This frequently leads to what the report calls the "catching-up-with-the-West mentality," as in a typical example: "Once Europe developed machines and mastered the use of power to run these machines, the West forged ahead rapidly. Now belatedly, the countries of the Orient are trying to catch up."

Many texts assume Western standards for Asian development by using "modernization" and "Westernization" as if they meant one and the same thing. One teacher's guide, for instance, suggested that the attention of the class be called to the fact that the father in a picture of a Japanese family was wearing "traditional"dress while the rest of the family was in "modern" attire. "Actually," commented the evaluator who cited this example, "the kimono worn by the father is no closer to Japanese clothes of a few centuries ago than the Western clothes worn by other family members are to Western clothes a few centuries ago."

Using Western standards, textbooks praise Asians by talking about their similarities with Americans. Evaluators quoted a number of cross-cultural comparisons, particularly with Japan, which assumed American technological, political, economic, sartorial, athletic, or even culinary standards as goals to be met by Asian nations.

"The Western way is the standard of normalcy--at least that is the implication," said one reader quoting from a text which said, "Japanese ocean liners are operated with great efficiency. Their ships which carry passengers to the Orient are quite as comfortable and safe as those of any other nation."

Summarizing evaluators' views on such "emphasis on the similar" in the texts, the report says, "The attitudes expressed toward Asia are positive. The examples cited are not inaccurate. However, there is a fine line between good intentions and ethnocentrism. What the readers objected to was the assumption that Asian societies are acceptable to the extent that they are reflections of our own."

Comments the report, "It could be argued that some Asians would also share a belief in Western technological, political, economic, or social superiority. Nevertheless it is one thing for an Asian to hold this belief; it is quite another for it to be the only point of view presented to American school students by American textbook authors."

But far more often, the net result of measuring Asian nations by Western standards is that they are described negatively, in terms of what they do not have. "Many books," says the report, "present Asia as a place of unrelieved misery," with small houses, little electricity, low incomes, a short lifespan, poor health care, few machines, low literacy,

and too many people. Examples of such treatment were so numerous in the texts that the report groups them by country and region of Asia.

Evaluators objected to the problem-based approach on two main grounds: one, that it ignores the positive side of Asian life; and two, that it neglects American ills, assuming a highly imaginary and idealized view of American life that does not accord with reality. "Using standards such as energy consumption or cancer rates can produce a less glowing picture of the United States," the report points out. Almost no effort is made by these books to balance the grim picture of Asian countries with an examination of their culture or to ask whether all of our technological advances are consonant with the national goals or values of Asian peoples, the report argues.

Commenting on the especially narrow-sighted focus on India's problems in the texts, the report says, "The discussion of these deficiencies is rarely balanced by an examination of the rich cultural heritage in India. Texts do not explore the art, the drama, or the stories from the Mahabharata that mothers tell to instill moral values."

Transportation seems to be a favorite topic of textbook writers determined to bring out the worst about Asia. Says one, "With all the progress that has been made, however,

there is still only one automobile for thousands of persons in China. The United States, by comparison, has so many automobiles that everybody in the country could go for a ride at one time." In citing examples like this, readers point out that no allowance is made for the fact that the Chinese may not think it is a good idea for every family to have a car, nor is any consideration given to the problems of pollution, inadequate mass transportation facilities, and energy shortages we now face as a result of our reliance on the private automobile.

Another evaluator found a passage in a text which dwelt at length on what a mystery machinery is to Indian villagers—so much so that they cannot drive properly and are forever overturning vehicles on curves. "Time and practice, of course, solve this problem," the book concludes. "Americans started with slow-moving Model-T Fords and, as a nation, over the years built and became adept at driving cars traveling at 60 to 80 mile-an-hour speeds on modern, four to eight-lane freeways. Indians are being thrust into the automobile age without a corresponding Model-T phase." Comments the reader on this passage, "The implication is that Indians are completely unable to handle technology. It is not mentioned that India is the sixth largest industrial power. Furthermore, Indians are able to keep automobiles running which would be on the scrap-heap elsewhere."

In addition to describing Asia from a Western point of view, many texts tend to talk about it to the extent that it

serves American interests,discussing Asian countries primarily in terms of their strategic importance to the United States. "We may not care to get mixed up in the problems of government in India or Southeast Asia," says one such book, "but it will be to our interest that those who do have a responsibility for those things shall be our friends, and that the native people of those distant lands shall be able to live peacefully and happily with as democratic a government as they are able to manage."

Some books also devote a disproportionate amount of space to the time during and after an Asian nation's contact with the West, slighting the thousands of years that may have preceded it. They tend to ignore the exploitative role of colonialism prior to World War II and to overemphasize the importance of American military and economic assistance to the well-being of Asia in the post-war period.

In addition to the specific examples they cited, the evaluators also indicated that there were more pervasive kinds of ethnocentrism in the topics selected for coverage and the organization of materials.

On the whole, textbook writers are unaware of their slant, the report finds. One book, which emphasizes the poverty of Asia and was judged to be strongly ethnocentric, states in its teacher's guide: "One of the objectives of

the text is to show that people have different ways of thinking and behaving and that these ways represent richness and strength, not impoverishment and weakness."

A few books were more aware that their basic underlying purpose was to glorify the American way of life. "The pupil comes to appreciate the basic American values, which make the United States distinct from other nations," said one.

Comments the report on the validity of such an objective, "If the real point of many texts is to promote American values, we might question not only the images they present of Asia, but also the American self-portrait...Should students be encouraged to measure worth in terms of economics or size and place great faith in machines? Is it wise to continue to glorify the use of electricity and automobiles? Should change be applauded at the expense of tradition?"

While the Western-centered approach dominated the texts, readers also found evidence of five other possible attitudes they were asked to look for by the evaluation guide: "Asia-centered," presenting Asian culture within its own value system and historical context; "eclectic," making a conscious effort to discuss Asia from several points of view; "Asia-as-superior," seeing Asian societies as more culturally advanced than Western societies; "Asia-as-sensational," in which Asians are described as being more colorful or exotic; and "Asians-as-inscrutable," in which they are presented as inexplicable.

Of these, the "Asia-centered" attitude was the most prevalent, appearing in 97 texts, dominating 57, and found exclusively in 18. "The fact that it did appear," says the report, "is an encouraging precedent to point out to publishers and textbook authors." All of the other approaches were relatively rare.

Citing an example of the "Asia-centered" outlook in a book on Thailand, an evaluator said, "The author has taken pains to explain the feeding of the priests in Thai terms: One of the most common forms of giving is feeding the Buddhist monks, who live on the generosity of the community. Each morning the monks go forth with their begging bowls. They call at houses and shops or stand in the streets waiting for contributions of rice, curry, or fruit. They do not ask for a contribution, and they receive one in silence. It is rather the giver who states his thanks for the opportunity to gain merit through performing a good deed."

Although he disliked the use of the term "begging bowl" because of its pejorative connotations in our culture, another reader underscored how valuable such an Asia-centered approach might be in understanding Asian nations to which we provide economic or military assistance. "The United States has been the most generous nation in history," he said, "but as donors we expect to be thanked for our gifts. In a Buddhist culture, however, since the donor acquires merit by giving, he should, in a sense, thank the recipient for giving him the opportunity to improve his spiritual status."

Another example of an Asia-centered approach cited by one of the readers explains how the Japanese prepare and drink tea in a special way and asks, "How might you feel if you went to Japan and you were the only person not sitting on the floor to eat and drink?"

Attempting to enable the child to get beyond the alien and exotic, the text goes on to inquire, "Why is this kind of behavior strange when you think about doing it in the United States, but not when you think about doing it in another country or in a Japanese restaurant?"

With a Western-centered, change-oriented approach that sees tradition as a hindrance to progress, most textbooks were, not surprisingly, found to be lacking in selections of literature, representations of the fine arts, and other such primary sources of Asian expression as historical and political documents, authentic case studies, and photographs of people.

In general, the report finds that literature, music, dance, and other aspects of Asian culture--if they are included or discussed at all--are presented negatively as hindrances to progress, as "strange," or as "like" or "unlike" ours (rather than on their own terms), or as unimportant. Sometimes textbooks refer to such materials but fail to include them or to show the reader how to go about finding out about them.

Where textbooks do contain literature, readers found that they occasionally present Western writing as if it were Asian ("the Pearl Buck-Rudyard Kipling syndrome," the report calls this practice), or rely on accounts of first-time experiences by Westerners in Asia--"travelers' tales," whose authors are more concerned with their own impressions than those of Asians. Some books retell myths and folktales, presenting them as though they were actually told by Asians, while recounting them in a condescending manner or changing their concepts or story-lines.

Often the closest a textbook will come to a people-oriented frame of reference is the case study. However, out of 75 instances in 260 texts in which readers found case studies, only 8 were evaluated as true to Asian life. Many of them in fact reveal more about the way Americans view Asians than how Asians see themselves.

One book, for instance, tells the story of an Indian untouchable who goes to the city, makes good with top grades and a well-paying job, and then returns to his village wearing a Western suit and shiny new shoes, only to be rejected and left standing in the dust by the caste-conscious people of his village.

The reader found it plainly incredible that the people where the youth worked would not be aware--or at least curious--about his caste, and that he himself would not know what to expect of the villagers when he returned home.

Argues the report, "the tenor of the story is far more that of a Horatio Alger plot gone sour than that of an actual Indian experience."

Many of the case studies are not only ethnocentrically presented but patently made-up--replete with invented dialogue and phony situations.

Describing an example taken from a world history book, an evaluator wrote, "Chapter 19--the opening story for Southeast Asia--is a story of Ellen and her father, an American businessman, who are seeing Bangkok by a boat trip on a canal. Siri is usually a girl's name; here it is used for a man.

"Siri, unlike most Thais, who won't talk politics with strangers, speaks of 'the threat of Communist China,' and says that Thais 'have little defense against the huge army of China.' The American, acting in an almost patronizing way and with a 'let me, the American, help you attitude,' tells Siri that he and his group of men can get him a scholarship so that Siri can learn modern ways so that Thailand will have educated leaders."

Aside from their bias and lack of authenticity, many of the invented case studies are also faulted by the evaluators for portraying Asian peoples as lifeless and one-dimensional. The problem with this, the report points out,

is that "students may get the impression of cultural uniformity and think that case-study people are typical of all other people in that country."

In sifting through a number of these studies, the staff of the Educational Resources/Asian Literature Program discovered not only that many were invented, but that not much imagination had been used in their creation.

In accounts of India, for instance, one character turns up in one incarnation after another. He has two personae, which the report dubs "Toothless Ram" and "Enlightened Ram." "Toothless Ram" is a miserably poor, disease-ridden, superstitious, illiterate, and hopelessly tradition-bound man, while "Enlightened Ram" is "in favor of progress, modernity, and Western ways." He is impatient with his family and countrymen, who cling to their traditions and refuse to change. "He is against the caste system, and in favor of democracy. He sees America as an idealized, slumless place where no one goes hungry." The report points out that while there are Indians who might resemble him in some respects, in the textbooks he is a caricature.

In addition to the textbooks' general failure to include genuine representations of Asian experience, their style and tone and illustrative materials were also found to reinforce their Western-centered approach. Language was often condescending, value-laden, cliche-ridden, and Europocentric.

Photographs and drawings were found to project the familiar stereotypes and ignore racial and cultural diversity.

The study also revealed that a very small percentage of specialists in Asian studies, particularly those in humanistic disciplines, are involved either as authors or consultants in the formulation of school textbooks concerned with Asia.

In two other major categories in which evaluators were asked to make judgments, accuracy and amount of Asian content, the textbooks also scored low.

Among 42 texts purporting to be "world" history books, evaluators found that the average amount of space devoted to Asia, with almost two-thirds of the world's people, was 15.6 percent. Many of the books examined, of course, were exclusively about Asia.

"On any given topic and region at a specific grade level, there are judged to be at most four usable titles. Most of the material on Asia judged to be acceptable is produced for the high school level," the report concluded.

The 306 books selected for the evaluation study, come from state and local text lists across the nation, publishers' catalogues, and social studies teachers who use them in their classrooms.

Initiated by The Asia Society's Educational Resources/ Asian Literature Program, the evaluation guide was first developed with the cooperation of a committee of participants

in a master's degree program in Asian studies at New York University, all of whom had had experience in Asia and in teaching about Asia in the elementary or secondary grades. The committee was headed by Loretta Ryan, Asia Society project associate for the study.

The guide was then tested and refined by an advisory board composed of nationally distinguished scholars and educators, including Donald Johnson, director of the N.Y.U. program; Jackson Bailey, Earlham College; Betty Bullard, Department of Public Instruction, Raleigh, North Carolina; James Hantula, Association for Asian Studies Committee on Elementary and Secondary Education; Marta Nicholas, writer and lecturer; Franklin Buchanan, Service Center for Teachers of Asian Studies, Ohio State University; Peter Bennett, Staples High School, Westport, Connecticut; Michael Fonte, Project on Asian Studies in Education, University of Michigan; Fern Ingersoll, writer and lecturer; Jean Johnson, Friends School, New York; and Harold Wright, Antioch College.

The Asia Society intends to use the evaluators' reports on the individual books as a basis to work with publishers on the revision of texts and the preparation of new materials. It also will attempt to enlist in this effort the participation of Asian specialists to an extent far greater than in the past.